

1747.6

A
DISSERTATION
UPON
That SPECIES of WRITING
CALLED
H U M O U R,
When applied to
SACRED SUBJECTS.

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Occasion'd by the Publication of a SERMON
preached at ALL-SOULS College in OXFORD,
on the Second Day of November last.

“ We live in an Age when the most *serious Subjects* are treated with
“ an Air of Ridicule; when every Man supposes that he has a
“ Right of thinking as he pleases on any Question, and of writing
“ ting and speaking whatever he thinks. I will not pretend to
“ say what Restraint ought to be laid on this Spirit of Licentiousness;
“ ousness; sorry I am to observe that, though heretofore it was
“ the Characteristic only of the young and giddy Libertine, it
“ has of late mixed itself with some graver Characters; and
“ infected, *as in the present Case*, even the Divine, and the
“ *Antiquarian*.”

Vindication of the Mallard of All-Souls College, Page 13.

L O N D O N,

Printed for J. RIVINGTON in *St. Paul's Church Yard*, and
sold by SACKVILLE PARKER, in *Oxford*, 1760.

DISSERTATION

UPON

THE SPECIES OF WRITING

CALLED

H U M O U R

When applied to

SACRED SUBJECTS

Occasioned by a Sermon
preached at
College in Oxford
on the 22nd of November last.



Written in an easy and familiar style, and intended to
be a satire on the various species of writing which are
now in vogue, and to show the absurdity of many of
the notions which are commonly received. I will not pretend to
say that it is a perfect work, but I am confident that it will
be found to contain many valuable observations, and that it
will be read with interest and amusement. The author is
a young man of letters, and his style is clear and elegant.
The subject is one of great importance, and the work is
well calculated to do good service.

Printed by J. Johnson, in Pall-mall, 1795.

L O N D O N

Printed by J. Johnson, in Pall-mall, 1795.

ADVERTISEMENT.

THE Author of this Dissertation, upon reading the Sermon which gave Occasion to it, could not help being apprehensive of the ill Consequences which might attend it considered both in an *Academical* and a *Religious* View. He wished therefore to see it properly censured under both these Characters; and indeed he was encouraged to hope as much. But, to his great Surprize and Mortification, instead of a *serious Rebuke*, which the Work seemed to call for, he met with little else but an awkward Imitation of that Humour which was intended to be exposed. Had not the Subject been of too *serious* a Nature to admit of *Ridicule*, this Method perhaps, well pursued, might have answered the Purpose. But in the *present* Case, he thinks such a kind of Animadversion the most proper, as will most effectually re-

move the present Scandal, and prevent the like Abuses for the future. With this View he humbly presents the following Reflections to the Reader; and hopes this will be a better Recommendation of his Performance, than if it had more of * *Chearfulness* and *Good-humour* in it.

OXFORD.

Feb. 14, 1760.

* See the Advertisement prefixed to the Sermon.

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DISSERTATION, &c.

THE Noble Author of the *Characteristics*, in his *Essay upon the Freedom of Wit and Humour*, hath with that Elegance which he shares with few, and that specious Gloss of Reasoning which is peculiar to himself, introduced *Ridicule* as the proper *Test of all Truth*, as the only *Medium* through which it's genuine Beauties can be discerned. "The gravest Gentlemen", he tells us, "even in the gravest Subjects, are supposed to acknowledge this, by asking in their gravest Arguments, *Is it not ridiculous?*" But surely the Noble Author intended to give us a Specimen

cimen of *Ridicule* when he offered this Assertion, which plays only upon the Equivocal Turn of the Word. Whoever is at all vers'd in Composition will easily discern that there is as great a Variety of Stiles, as there are Species of Subjects to be treated of; and that the peculiar Excellence of an Author shews itself as much in the Manner of his Expression, as in the Matter of his Argument. A Seriousness of Reasoning will best become some Topics, whilst others are better dismissed in a Joke. If therefore his Subject be grave and important, a Dignity of Expression, a Chastity of Sentiment, and a Soberness of Stile, will be the best Recommendation both of the Author and his Work; ---- whilst *Wit* and *Humour* will entertain themselves where they may sport with Innocence, and wanton without Offence.

Nature herself has marked out this Distinction, and set her Boundaries between these opposite Talents, by bestowing them generally upon different Persons; or, if they are sometimes united in *one* Mind,

Mind, yet are they never so blended as not to be called forth *singly*, and made to exert themselves *separately*, as Occasion shall require the Service of either.--- And agreeably to this Distinction, founded in *Nature*, the *Critics* have formed their Rules of Composition ; and have insisted upon nothing more peremptorily than an exact Correspondence between the Language and Sentiment, between the Sentiment and Subject.* The most approved *Classical Authors* have uniformly observed this *Decorum*, never letting themselves down beneath the Dignity of the Character they profess to sustain, or giving a Loose to Levity but where they intend to rally and ridicule. They knew indeed that Truth might be dressed in such a questionable Shape as to make it appear *ridiculous* ; but they never thought such an antic Dress could be any Test of it's real Excellence, or that the Disguise would become it better than it's own

* ————— Tristia mæstum
Vultum Verba decent, iratum plena Minarum,
Ludentem lasciva, severum seria dictu.

Horat. de Art Poet.

native and simple Attire. Some of them have indeed indulg'd this Vein of Humour upon Subjects reputed to be *sacred*; but profess'dly with a Design to *expose*, and not to *defend*, the Positions they pretended to advance. *Lucian* perhaps is the best Model of this kind of Writing; and one may venture to say that the *Pagan* Superstition suffered not more from the serious Attacks of the gravest Philosophers than from the *Buffoonery* of this ludicrous Author.----But all this is still in *Character*. Had he fondly hoped to have recommended his Gods by setting them in this ridiculous Light, he would himself have been the properest Object of Ridicule.

But I need not surely insist upon this *Decorum* in *Prose* Authors; when even the *Muse*, however airy and flighty she may be thought, did not yet think herself at Liberty to transgress these Bounds. In her more sublime Meditation she was grave and sedate; insomuch that scarce a Passage can be produced from either of the two celebrated Models of

Epic

Epic Poetry inconsistent with that Majesty which is the Characteristic of the *Epic* Muse. Indeed *Homer* has his *Batrachomyomachia*, and *Virgil* his *Culices*; but the Heroes of those Poems immediately discover the Intention of the Authors, and the Characters introduced strongly mark the *Burlesque*.---But this Distinction is still more religiously preserved in the ancient *Dramatic* Pieces. *Tragedy* had it's peculiar Province suited to the Importance of it's Subject and the Dignity of it's Characters, never indulging that *Wit* and *Humour* which were the proper Talent of the *Comic* Muse.----This short Sketch, however imperfectly drawn, will, I hope, serve to illustrate the Distinction insisted on, and to point the Propriety and Regularity of a Consistence between the Sentiment and Subject.

But we must not rest the Matter here. A bare *classical* Impropriety may indeed do Discredit to one who professes himself a *Scholar*, as it discovers an Ignorance of what that Appellation supposes him to be well acquainted with. Yet this may be

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forgiven,

forgiven, when it is not attended with other Consequences of a more alarming Nature. There are certain Subjects which have a natural Claim to our more serious Consideration ; of the Treatment of which we are not to judge altogether by any Rules which Critics may have established, or Heathen Writers have thought themselves obliged to conform to. Concerning these there is one unerring Rule, which whoever deviates from, even though he maintain the Character of a good *Classic*, must forfeit that of a good *Christian*. *Heathen* Authors wrote for Fame, and hoped for no other Reward than what the Applause of their Readers might bestow upon them. The Height therefore of *their* Ambition was to be thought learned and ingenious. But the *Christian* Writer, when he engages in Subjects connected with his Profession, should have nobler Ends in View. The Good of Mankind, the Honour of true Religion, and the Glory of God, should influence every Thought and Expression. One might hope that the *Sacredness* of the Subject alone might defend it from the
profane

profane Breath of *Ridicule* and *Burlesque* ; that the *Word of God* would command such Reverence as might secure to it it's undoubted Right of being handled upon all Occasions with Decency and Seriousness. To apply the Test of *Ridicule* *here*, what is it but to scoff at Religion, and deride it's Author? Though the sacred Oracles will stand the Test of any Kind of Examination, and however *tortured* by the Severity or Levity of it's Enemies will like Silver tried in the Fire come forth pure and unfullied; yet will this Method of treating it prejudice weak Minds, who are more taken with Appearance than Reality, and are apt to think every Thing to be ridiculous *in itself* which happens to be laughed at. This is frequently the Case even in common Life; where good Sense is laughed out of Countenance by the Licentiousness of Wit and Scurrility.

But it will least of all become him, who has dedicated his Life to the more *peculiar* Study of the Holy Scriptures, and has solemnly engaged to explain

them to the People with Fidelity, to pervert their genuine Meaning, and bend them to any Interpretation which his wanton or malicious Fancy may suggest. The great Champion of *Wit* and *Humour* himself * expressly acknowledges that it ought to be under some Restriction in *public Company*, and much more before *solemn Assemblies*. He speaks of it as an audacious Affront to the common Sense of any *Body of Men*, to attack in such a Way whatever is esteemed important or interesting by them. All he contends for is a *Frankness of Humour* upon any Subject, of how high a Nature soever, that shall happen to be started in *private Conversation among Friends*. And yet even this is an Indulgence which will not readily be granted by the serious Christian. Whoever is sincere in his Profession of that Religion cannot avoid either thinking or discoursing of it upon every Occasion with the highest Awe and Reverence. *The Freedom of Conversation*, to which some are apt to make such valuable Sacrifices, will never, in his Opinion, justify

* See his Essay above referred to.

the least Approach towards *Pleasantry* upon so *sacred* a Subject; much less will it warrant a ludicrous Allusion to any Passage or Character in Holy Writ, or the wretched Perversion of any Phrase that may sound quaint to fashionable Ears, from the mean Ambition of raising a Laugh in Company.----What shall we say then if a Text of Scripture has not only been glanced at in a *transient* Way, but by *deliberate Choice* been selected, and placed in the Front of a Sermon professedly composed to serve the Purpose of *Chearfulness* and *Goodhumour*?----That all *Humour* is misapplied when introduced into solemn Compositions, will by this Time be granted. But the Humour of that Sermon which gave Occasion to these Reflections will deserve a still severer Censure, as it is mixed with uncharitable Satire. If the Author seriously imagined that the Text he discussed carried with it the Import he has given it; if he really thought that *Elisha* under the Image of a *Pot* intended to typify all that *he* has extracted from it, where, it may be asked, is the *uncommon Humour* of the Sermon? *It is then*

then only a simple Explanation of an obvious Type. Yet his Advertisement insinuates that there is *Chearfulness* and *Goodhumour* at the Bottom; which therefore can only be founded in the *ludicrous* Application of the Text. He would no doubt be affronted to have his *Wit* or *Invention* questioned; he cannot therefore be angry that the World interprets his Discourse in the Sense in which he meant it.

What more particularly induced me to make these Remarks was, I confess, an Apprehension that the University itself might suffer in it's Character from a *ludicrous* Discourse having been *solemnly preached* in one of it's Colleges, and afterwards *published* to the World with it's History so circumstantially prefixed. It might be imagined perhaps that this Method of treating the Holy Scriptures, and *entertaining* our Congregations from the Pulpit, is pretty fashionable among us. And such a Custom, supposed to be prevalent, would, I apprehend, reflect no great Honour upon this ancient and renowned

nowned Seminary of grave and orthodox Divines. But it is proper to inform the World that such Suspicions as these, however naturally they might arise from the *present* Occasion, have really no Foundation in Fact. The University stands clear of any such Imputation; and, had not the Sermon been *anonymous*, would no doubt have fixed some very severe Mark of Censure upon its Author. At least this may fairly be collected from the Opinions of *Individuals* concerning it, who seem unanimously to condemn it as a most licentious Performance, and as having a Tendency to inspire Libertinism into the *Junior* Part of our Members; by much the Majority of whom are sent hither in order to be instructed in the *true* Method of expounding the Word of God, and should consequently be taught to look with Abhorrence upon any Attempt, however specious, to *burlesque* the sacred Records of our Religion.

Upon a Review then it will, I hope, appear that the Application of *Humour*
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to *sacred* Subjects may fairly be condemned as *unclassical*, as well as wicked and profane; that it is as much an Argument of a false and vitiated Taste, as it is an Offence against Decency and Religion. But when it is considered in the *latter* View, it must be own'd to carry with it something very deplorable and alarming. The Licentiousness of the present Age, the insolent Attacks of the avowed Adversaries of the established Religion, and the perhaps more mischievous Buffoonery of some who profess themselves of it's Communion, have well nigh destroyed all Reverence for the Word of God; and, unless they speedily receive some severe Check either from *Ecclesiastical* or *Civil* Authority, will proceed from *discountenancing* and *ridiculing* to the utterly *suppressing*, as far as may be, of all Seriousness and Devotion among us. What real Christian is not shocked to see the *Words of Truth and Soberness* prostituted to the shameful Purpose of displaying a *witty Imagination*, and by the loose Ingenuity of the Commentator wrested

wrested into *comical* Allegories, and made to take Part in private Prejudices and Disputes?

A late *Reviewer* of the Sermon in Question has taken great Liberties in reflecting upon a certain venerable Member of this learned Body as the undoubted Author of it. But certainly his Insinuations must be as void of all Justice and Foundation, as his Manner is of Modesty, or his Conceits of all true satirical Humour and Keeness. There are but few, I verily think, into whose Hands the Sermon shall happen to fall, but will be tempted to look upon the *Title-Page itself* as a scandalous Libel upon the Body of the University, and upon one very respectable Society in particular. It can never therefore be suspected that he, who is *ONE OF THE ORNAMENTS* * of that Society, could so far forget the Dignity of his Station and Character as to be the Author of a Piece which evidently tends

* See *Note* p. 29. of the Sermon.

to bring a Reproach upon sound Learning and true Religion; the Connection between which he hath in another Sermon so elegantly set forth. Did ever any Christian Minister publickly make a Joke of his Function, and attempt to turn into *Ridicule* that Method and Form of Instruction from the Word of God which has prevailed from the Foundation of our Religion, and for their peculiar Excellence in which the Divines of this Church and Nation have deservedly gained immortal Honour in the Christian World?----But luckily it happens that the Gentleman whom this *shameless Reviewer* has so rashly and wantonly pointed out, is known to be one of a directly opposite Stamp. It is true he is possessed of a pretty large Share of *Cheerfulness* and *Good-humour*; but where, I would ask, is the Inconsistency between these and the sound and orthodox Principles of all Sorts which it is notorious he imbibed from his Infancy, and still continues to cherish with the utmost Care and Fidelity? If his Conversation, though for the most Part full of

Mirth

Mirth and *Sprightliness*, has ever been *chaste* and *delicate*, if he has ever religiously abstained from that profane Species of jesting which has gained so many Proselytes to Infidelity; it is a downright *absurd* as well as a most *injurious* Imputation merely to suppose him capable of *writing a Sermon* that might tend to expose Sermon-writing,---of suffering it to be *delivered as a Sermon* upon a solemn Occasion before a learned and venerable Audience,---and afterwards of *publishing* it to the World *in the same Form* upon the sole Recommendation of there “being in it more *Chearfulness* and *Good-humour* than usually happens to the Share of a Sermon.” Besides, that the supposed Author was not ignorant to what *particular* Kind of Subjects Wit and Humour ought to be restrained, I may appeal to those several inimitable Pieces*, generally allowed to be written by him; in which he employed this Talent of his so happily, and at the same Time with such Propriety,

* The Vindication of the Mallard, the Explanation of the Oxford Almanack, the Game of All-Fours, &c.

as to have acquired the Character of an ingenious and facetious Writer, without hurting himself in that of a *Divine*. The World does not expect, nor does Religion seem to require, that a Man of a good natural Turn for Humour should, out of Regard to any grave Character which he may happen to sustain, *suppress* his Talent, whenever an *innocent* Occasion of exerting it comes in his Way. But *common Sense* and an *ordinary Judgment* will teach almost any Man to distinguish in such Cases; and *common Decency* will restrain him from letting loose his Railery upon, and giving a ridiculous Turn to, any Part of those Writings which he at the same Time quotes as the Word of God.——But this Gentleman is himself too capable of appearing in his own Vindication to need my further Apology for him.

Enough perhaps has been said to remove the Aspersions from so respectable a Character as that of the supposed Author of the Sermon. But what shall we say for

for the *Preacher*? Who, as it should seem from the Advertisement, is a distinct Person from the Author. No small Share of the Reproach will, it is to be feared, fall upon *him*. For if it was unworthy of a Christian Divine to *pen* so ludicrous a Discourse, it must be at least equally unworthy of a Christian Preacher to *deliver* it. But to make him all the Allowances which his Case will admit of, it may be urged perhaps in his Excuse that it was *obtruded* upon him hastily, and preached by him inadvertently; ----- that he was not acquainted with it's true Design, and did not readily apprehend the *Good-humour* and *Ill-nature* which lurked beneath it. He looked upon it probably in a *serious* Light (as many well-meaning Persons have been impos'd upon in similar Cases), and thought perhaps that the Parallel was justly drawn; ----- that the Foundation which dealt out so liberal a Maintenance might not *improperly* be compared to *Elisba's* Pot. But had he been sensible of the Poison convey'd in this Comparison, of the uncharitable Insinuations

finuations obliquely aimed at *one Part* of his Fellow-Collegians, in order at any Rate to compliment *another*; a Regard not only to his own Character, but also to the Peace of the Society, would, I trust, have prevented *his* Disgrace, and the Author's Infamy. But was he really *acquainted* with the Drift of the Writer, and did he *knowingly* submit to the mean Office of publishing another's Slander?— I must *then* leave him to his own Reflections, and to the just Censure of those many who think Religion may have been wounded, and the Peace of the Society disturbed, through his Means.

5 JA 59.

The E N D.

ERRATUM. For *point*, read *point out*, page 9, line 18.

